

News Release

For Immediate Release

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TRANSCRIPT OF CLARION LEDGER “Q & A” 5/3/98

Editor’s note: The following is a transcript of the weekly “Q & A” profile of elected officials that featured Dr. Lester Spell Jr., DVM, Commissioner of the Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce (MDAC). This profile appeared on page 2H of the Sunday, May 3, 1998 edition of The Clarion Ledger newspaper, published in Jackson, Mississippi.

Q How important is agriculture to Mississippi?

A Agriculture is the single largest dollar generating industry in Mississippi. In 1997, \$4.6 billion worth of agricultural goods were grown, produced or sold in our state. And, when you factor in wages and agriculture related industries, that number rises to about \$20 billion each year. Agriculture makes possible the employment of 1 out of every 3 Mississippians.

Q What role does the Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce (MDAC) play?

A MDAC is the lead agency in promoting Mississippi’s agricultural interests. Mississippians have elected me as the spokesman for agriculture in our state and I take that responsibility very seriously. Our Marketing Division seeks new market opportunities for Mississippi products worldwide. I recently returned from Toronto, Canada where we promoted a variety of southern produce and our Marketing Director is in the Far East now working to expand the market for Mississippi aquaculture. In addition to promoting our state’s products, we have many regulatory responsibilities at MDAC, some of which may surprise you.

Q What do you regulate?

A We regulate things that affect the lives of every Mississippian in some way. We help make sure the food you eat is safe through inspections at over 90 meat processing plants and 2,691 retail food establishments. We inspect seeds, regulate crop herbicides and license pest control operators. We test gas quality and pump accuracy at more than 43,000 gas pumps across the state so that when you buy a gallon of gas, you get a gallon of gas. Our Weights & Measures Division checks everything from the scales at grain elevators and timber yards to the scales at your local grocery stores. The Agriculture Theft Bureau, which investigates farm crime from cattle theft to arson throughout the state, comes under the jurisdiction of MDAC. That bureau recovers stolen property at a rate twice the national average.

Q How do you keep up with such a wide variety of responsibilities?

A One of the accomplishments that I am most proud of is the complete reorganization of MDAC since I took office in 1996. We have 18% fewer people in our department than 3 years ago, yet inspections are up 22% overall. We also have implemented one of the most modern computer networks of any state agency in the United States, and it has really helped us to greatly increase productivity.

Q I hear and read a lot about high-tech industries these days. Will they eventually replace agriculture as the major presence in our state?

A No – in fact, technology is helping to increase Mississippi's agricultural position. Genetically enhanced crops increase productivity. New techniques such as precision farming use satellite technology to greatly increase land use efficiency. This same technology is allowing farmers to practice increased environmental stewardship, by using fewer chemicals than ever.

In addition, survey after survey shows that people involved with agriculture use high-tech features like computers and the Internet at higher rates than the population in general. That's because they use it to get information on weather, commodity prices and the latest market trends.

Q What are some other agriculture trends?

A One of the biggest trends in Mississippi agriculture today is diversity. In 1966, our top 5 commodities were:

1. Cotton
2. Broilers & Eggs
3. Cattle
4. Soybeans
5. Dairy.

In 1997 our top 5 were:

1. Broilers & Eggs
2. Forestry
3. Cotton
4. Soybeans
5. Catfish.

As Mississippi's agricultural economy develops we are seeing new products and new developments within existing industries. In recent years, we've also seen increased growth in farmer-owned cooperatives. These co-ops give even the smallest farmer "market muscle."

Diversity is also the trend on small farms. We are seeing a tremendous increase in small operations that focus on specialty crops, such as fruits and vegetables or nurseries. We are blessed with a climate that can grow a tremendous variety of crops and our farmers are taking advantage of this.

Along with diversification, we are also seeing what is called "value added processing," meaning we don't just produce the raw materials, we process them and tailor them to the consumer as well. We produce catfish fillets as well as catfish, furniture as well as timber and chicken nuggets as well as chickens. In fact, we are the number one producer *and processor* of pond-raised catfish in America and produce 70% of the world's pond raised catfish.

Q What are your future plans?

A As agriculture's elected spokesman, I will find ways to bring together its many complex and sometimes competing interests. We will be a strong advocate for technological advances in agriculture, just as we have streamlined and modernized MDAC's operations. We will press for a stronger Mississippi presence in the world marketplace. We will support and challenge our great land grant institutions, Alcorn State University and Mississippi State University, to develop ideas that will keep us in our accustomed role of agriculture leadership. We have the ability to combine our strong agricultural heritage with rapidly advancing technology. We will take advantage of it.

Q How can people get in touch with you?

A You can call MDAC at (601) 359-1100 or visit our web side at www.mdac.state.ms.us. You can also send us a letter to P.O. Box 1609, Jackson MS 39215-1609.